

## Discussion Notes

### Life, Together: *Together in the Body*

September 8, 2019, Fort Langley

## Reading

*"I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me."* (John 17.21).

- Every now and then in a life of faith we find ourselves asking, "what does God want *for* me or *from* me?"; but perhaps an equally important question is, "what did *Jesus pray* for me?", or even more aligned with Jesus' imagination, "what did *Jesus pray* for *us*?"
- **Story:** A two-year-old asked by her mother if she would like another brother or sister and replying "no". And we know doubt understand how she feels – *I'm fine all by myself, thank you very much, without the inconvenient clutter of other people.*
- The question of what God really wants *for* and *from* human beings, is a question Jesus asks relentlessly in the Gospels. And it's through Jesus' own life, and through Jesus' prayer, that it becomes clear that *togetherness* is one of God's primary concerns. What did Jesus work for? Reconciliation. What did Jesus pray for? Solidarity.
- But we'd probably have to admit that *togetherness and harmony* aren't always among humanity's primary concerns. We have tendency to isolate rather than involve ourselves, and our society has become obsessed with thinking of ourselves primarily as autonomous individuals. Much like the little girl who is somewhat disinterested in a little brother or sister encroaching on her territory, we're sometimes happy to keep our distance from one another. But then we hear Jesus, who invites to think differently, and to see ourselves not as *autonomous individuals*, but instead as *interdependent persons*.

## The Metaphor of Body

- This is what Jesus prays in John 17, "that we would be one", together with God and with one another; a togetherness made possible by Jesus' own reconciling death and resurrection.

- But this prayer, this possibility, had to then be fleshed out in the very first Jesus communities, admittedly with varying degrees of success and failure; just as Jesus' prayer is being fleshed out amongst us today, again with varying degrees of success and failure.
- In the *fleshing out of togetherness* the first Christians found language to describe what being *together* in Christ really meant. As we heard last week one of those images was of *family*; but St. Paul draws on another metaphor in his first letter to a small church in Greece. It's a picture of complexity and interconnection, that of a *human body*.

### Reading 1 Corinthians 12

*"The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ...our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' The head can't say to the feet, 'I don't need you.' In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary...If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it."*

- The image Paul shares is so vivid we've adopted his language as shorthand for the Church herself – *the body of Christ*. Three ideas emerge from the metaphor of belonging in the body: *The body is innately Christ's, the body is innately diverse, and the body is innately interdependent.*

### Innately Christ's

- "You are an autonomous individual" says much of society. Not so, says St. Paul. Belonging to the *body of Christ* means a relinquishment of our self-determination. In Christ we are all of us together under the name of Jesus, with an identity rooted in our new-creation reality. So for Paul, it is through relation to God we discover ourselves most truly, not through our autonomy from God.

- Consequently, in a life of faith we give up the notion that we're going it alone, or that others should go it alone. And it's with the knowledge that we are all of us *together Christ's* and not our own, that we are mindful of how we think, speak and act toward one another.
- We choose to relate to one another in humility and love, not only because each of us is worthy of love, not only because we follow Jesus' example of love, but because by loving one another, somehow mysteriously, we are loving Jesus himself. That's how Jesus is with the people he reconciles to God through the cross and resurrection.
- So we, in this local church, are not our own, but are first Christ's. We're not Michelle's church, or Brian's church, or Luke's church, or even Fort Langley's church. We are first Jesus' church, because it is only through Jesus that we are together to begin with. "*All of you together are Christ's body....*"
- So when it comes to being innately Christ's, what is failure? We fail when we live in decided self-determination as if we're not dependent on God as human creatures; we fail when we forget who joins us, with that forgetfulness influencing how we relate to one another. But when we do fail, Jesus' uncompromising invitation is to turn from lonely independence, and toward a home in God. It's an invitation to be reunited when we've run away from home. How do we thrive? We thrive when we keep sight of our name, our home, in Christ, and let Christ shape our communal culture, so that how we relate to one another is shaped by how Christ relates to us.

### **Innately Diverse**

- Diversity is something of a buzz word today. But in the *body of Christ* it's anything but a marketing ploy or box to tick. Jesus, as he said, "draws all people to himself", so we are, right away, a very mixed bag (choose your friends, not your family).
- "*So it is with the body of Christ...our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it.*" (1 Corinthians 12)
- Diversity in the body takes different forms. We may be ethnically or nationally diverse, we may be socially or economically diverse, we may be diverse in our gifts,

our vocations, our personalities, our histories. So diversity can be glaringly obvious, but it's also subtle. And *subtle* diversity only becomes apparent when we commit to the complexity of community life.

- That's why it can be so detrimental when we assume we know one another before we've taken the time to explore, or when we presume to judge one another on first impressions. If we are to truly *together* we must learn instead to become curious, to celebrate even subtle diversity, and not to fear one another - when we're sure we're too different to be together. And it's in this kind of *variation* we find space to be ourselves. We can be together, and we can be different – meaning we can learn to embrace our potentials and also our limitations.
- So when do we fail in diversity? We fail when we make snap judgements about one another; when we don't make room for one another; we fail when we don't face our limitations and try to do it all. Again, that's Jesus' freeing invitation to us. To find ourselves, our home, not only in the broad community of Christ's body, but to discover our particular place with confidence and humility. That's also we thrive in diversity. We thrive when we're curious about one another and celebrate one another. We thrive when we face both our potential and our limitation and choose to be who we are, not everyone else, or anyone else.

### **Innately Interdependent**

- So together we are *Christ's*; together we are *diverse*; together we're *interdependent*.
- Recognizing our diversity helps us to see the reality of equality in the body of Christ, and beyond that into the reality of *interdependence*.
- *"Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' The head can't say to the feet, 'I don't need you.' In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary...If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad."*
- This is what's so provocative about Jesus' vision for humanity, even today. This vision of interdependence takes us beyond a *simple tolerance* of diversity, and into the possibility

of genuine connection. What an invitation for our society which is still in many ways divided up, disconnected and content to remain so. When we've ignored the reality of interdependence, we face all kinds of social, even environmental fallout because of our unwillingness to recognize our interconnection and interdependence as human beings – much like the acrobat in the comic in a moment of conditional interdependence.

- But the invitation of Jesus', the way of being a part of Jesus' body, is the way of interdependence, something that points toward how we are designed, and in fact, how our world is ordered. So in the body of Christ it's not enough for you to make your way, and for me to make mine, so long as we respect one another's diversity at a distance. Instead we're reminded of just how much we need each other. *"The eye can never say to the hand, 'I don't need you.'"* That's what Jesus is always telling us, over again the gospels. That's the question he asks. "Are you willing to open up and recognize your need for God. Are you willing recognize your need for one another?"
- So the body of Christ is a people who choose to face the reality of interconnection and of interdependence and to explore it.
- So when do we fail at interdependence? We fail when we treat Christian community as consumable and observable from the outside. We fail when we say "I don't need you and you probably don't need me." But in that failure, we will always meet Jesus. Not only drawing us in, but drawing others also; and Jesus always helps us to truly appreciate God, and to truly appreciate one another. That's when we thrive. We thrive when we remember the reality of interdependence and open up to God, committing to one another in love. We thrive when we say, "I need you. And you need me."
- That's probably where we can pause today facing a new fall season. With the possibility of connection and interconnection literally all around us, we can ask: *"Together in this body, how do I need you to be you? And how do you need me to be me?"* And then explore the innumerable possibilities.

**Discussion Questions:**

- What does the metaphor of “the body” tell us about God? About ourselves?
- What is freeing about seeing ourselves in “the body”?
- What have you learned about life “in the body” in your time in Christian community?  
Where have you seen failure? Where have you seen thriving?
- In what ways are you exploring life “in the body” this year?